

## MAGIC REALISM IN ARISTOPHANES?<sup>1</sup>

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The term ‘magic realism’, normally reserved for twentieth-century novels with a mixture of realistic and fantastic elements, has not, to my knowledge, been applied to the comedies of Aristophanes. In this article I examine whether there are similarities between Aristophanes’ comedies and magic realism. First, the origin, development and meaning of the term ‘magic realism’ are explored. Then, Italo Calvino’s 1952 novella, *The cloven Viscount*, is investigated as example of magic realism. The next section examines the duality of Aristophanes’ comedies: they not only allude to the socio-political realities of late-fifth-century Athens but also hinge on plots of comic fantasy. This scheme is then applied to the Aristophanic comedy *Birds*. In the penultimate section a comparison is drawn between magic realism, as exemplified in *The cloven Viscount*, and Aristophanic comedy, as exemplified in *Birds*. The conclusion is devoted to an attempt to account for the similarities in such disparate genres.

### 1. Introduction

‘This sort of thing does happen, I suppose’ (De Bernières 2005:22). In Louis de Bernières’ magic-realist novel *Birds without wings*, Iskander the Potter confides that it was said that the beautiful Philothei was born with a full head of hair, and then adds the quoted comment. Although being born with a full head of hair is not all that extraordinary, Iskander’s quizzical apophthegm could be taken as the quintessence of magic realism.

The concept and definition of ‘magic(al) realism’ (the mixture of the quotidian and the fantastic) is treated in Section 2. Here, it suffices to state that this article will attempt to apply this definition to a novella of Italo Calvino, *The cloven Viscount*. This novella contains both ‘realistic’ and ‘magical’ elements, the former a war between Austria and Turkey in the eighteenth century as well as customs and

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to my sons, Alexander and Waldemar, for stimulating my interest in magic realism by wrestling magic-realist stories from me in their infancy, by their reading habits ever since, and by their creative output in drawing, painting and writing.

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practices typical of the era, the latter a Viscount who is cloven in two and whose two halves live on as independent individuals.

Although critics have identified elements such as ‘fantasy’ (Whitman 1964:259-280), ‘utopia’ Reckford (1987:312-329) and ‘the absurd’ (Cartledge 1990) in Aristophanes’ comedies, the term ‘magic realism’ has not, to my knowledge, been applied to his work. Hence, I propose to examine whether this term, normally reserved for a subgenre of the twentieth-century novel, could be brought to bear on as different a genre as fifth-century Old Comedy.

The eleven extant plays of Aristophanes tend to display a duality between political reality and comic fantasy. ‘Realism’ is represented by the depiction (usually with comic exaggeration) of the socio-political realities of late fifth-century Athens (e.g. the jury system in *Wasps*, or the effects of the Peloponnesian War in the three peace plays). The plots of Aristophanic comedies, however, also hinge on fantasy, or ‘freedom from everyday logic’ (Anderson 1978:24), in which natural laws are inverted, or ignored, by the whims of the comic hero(ine). Trygaios, for instance, ascends to heaven on the back of a beetle in *Peace*; Dionysos descends to Hades in *Frogs*. As an example of the duality between political reality and comic fantasy in Aristophanes, *Birds* will be examined. The fantasy element is represented by the founding of a city in the clouds by Peisetairos and Euelpides, whereas allusions to the political reality of Athens in 414 are spread throughout the comedy, albeit with less urgency than in previous plays.

The penultimate section of this article is devoted to a comparison of *The cloven Viscount* and *Birds*, in which both differences and similarities are identified. The main similarity is that both genres betray a duality between fantasy and reality, with the proviso that the fantastic is accepted as normal by the characters. In conclusion, I attempt to account for this similarity, taking recourse to four theoretical frameworks: Genette’s metaphor of a palimpsest, Van Boheemen’s metaphor of a library, the Jungian collective unconscious, and especially Aristotle’s distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘history’, representing two opposite and complementary poles in all genres of literature.

## 2. *Magic realism*

The term *magic realism* was first used in 1925 by Franz Roh, a German art historian. He used the term *magischer Realismus* with reference to a new movement in painting — that of post-expressionism. The term referred to the celebration of the return to figural representation in painting after more than a decade of the more abstract art of expressionism (Zamora & Faris 1995:15). Impressionism predominantly focused on the depiction of something that already

existed, whereas expressionism gave expression to ‘the fantastic, extraterrestrial or remote objects’ (Roh 1995:16-17). In 1949, Alejo Carpentier published *The kingdom of this world*, in the introduction of which he develops the concept of *lo real maravilloso americano* — ‘the marvellous real of South America’ (Zamora & Faris 1995:75). In 1955, the article ‘Magical realism in Spanish American fiction’ by Angel Flores appeared. It was the first time that the term *magic realism* was used in an academic context to define a trend in Spanish-American literature (Scarano 1999:17). Flores (1995:113) credits Jorge Luis Borges’ publication *A universal history of infamy* in 1935 with laying the groundwork for the magic-realist trend in Latin-American literature; he uses the influential description which is still regarded by most critics as the original definition of magic realism (Flores 1995:112): ‘The novelty therefore consists of the amalgamation of realism and fantasy’. This amalgamation can be effected by the use of two procedures (Scarano 1999:17): ‘the realistic narration of the unreal; and the unrealistic narration of the real (or if you prefer, the naturalization of the unreal, and the supernaturalization of the real)’. Gene Wolfe has proposed, tongue in cheek, that ‘magic realism is fantasy written in Spanish’ (Leeper 2003). However, the term has also been used to describe the mixture of the quotidian and the fantastic in works of non-Spanish-American novelists such as Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie and Etienne van Heerden.

According to Hegerfeldt (2002:66), ‘the magic realist mode [...] introduces items that violate the realist standards it purportedly adheres to. Characteristically, these non-realistic items cannot be [...] explained away as dreams, hallucinations, metaphors, or lies; presented in a strikingly nonchalant and matter-of-fact manner (often even demonstratively so), there seems to be no option but to accept them as part of the fictional world. Saleem’s miraculous gifts of telepathy and smell in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s children*, Villanelle’s webbed feet in Winterson’s *The passion*, and even Fevvers’ wings in Carter’s *Nights at the circus*; all these and many other implausibilities / impossibilities in the end have to be taken [...] at face value’.

Hegerfeldt (2002:63) argues that the magic element in magic realism texts contains something that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as we know them. Realism is seen as a western convention because this paradigm attempts to create an accurate picture of the world, and emphasises a rational-scientific approach to create this picture. Magic realism is commensurate with this reality because it is grounded in a recognizable reality where social, historical and political references anchor the narratives (Baker 1997:1). Importantly, magic-realist works are thus reality-bound, but various fantastic or magical elements appear which are experienced by the characters, as well as the readers, as ‘normal’. In the absence of an explanation for or analysis of the extraordinary events, the

reader cannot but view the magical as part of normal reality too. Moreover, the narrator also contributes to a deadpan sense of presentation. Gabriel García Márquez is quoted as saying: '[T]he key to writing *One hundred years of solitude* was the idea of saying incredible things with a completely unperturbed face' (McMurray 1983:87).

Since magic realist texts tend to offer access to plural worlds, these texts are frequently situated in what Zamora & Faris (1995:6) call 'liminal territory' — i.e. the space between or among those worlds. In this liminal space, transformation, metamorphosis and dissolution are common phenomena. As we shall see, the term 'liminal space' can also be applied to Aristophanic comedy.

Magic realism can be differentiated from comparable genres that sometimes overlap. According to Young & Hollaman (1984:1), magic realism is a category of fiction that could be distinguished from traditional realistic and naturalistic fiction on the one hand, and from recognized categories of the fantastic such as ghost story, science fiction, gothic novel, and fairy tale. To these, utopian fiction could be added. In this article, however, no hard and fast distinction will be drawn between fantasy fiction and utopian fiction, because both terms have been applied to Aristophanes with equal validity.

### 3. *Italo Calvino: The cloven Viscount*

In this section, the theoretical scheme of Section 2 will be applied to *The cloven Viscount*. But first, some background about its author.

The Italian author Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923. He grew up near Genoa and joined the partisans of the Italian Resistance in 1943, fighting for two years in the Garibaldi Brigade against the Nazis in World War II. He joined the Communist Party in 1945, but resigned after the invasion of Hungary by the USSR in 1956. He lived in Turin, where he worked as an editor at Einaudi Publishers, Paris and Rome. Calvino wrote numerous short stories, some published together in novel form, and gradually turned from politically committed literature to fantasy. He died in 1985 (De Lauretis 1986:97).

*The cloven Viscount* is a fantasy novella by Calvino. It was first published by Einaudi in 1952. Together with *The Baron in the trees* and *The nonexistent knight* it forms Calvino's *Our ancestors* trilogy. I have chosen this novella above better known novels as an example of magic realism for reasons of length: a summary and analysis of *One hundred years of solitude* or *Of love and shadows*, for instance, spanning generations and containing many interacting characters, would have been beyond the scope of this article. My motivation is thus not only pragmatic (it is feasible to compare the two shorter works) but also aesthetic (it is

more pleasing to do so than to struggle through the minefield that a longer work provides).

### 3.1 *The cloven Viscount*: Plot summary

The narrator of *The cloven Viscount* is an orphan boy (p.18)<sup>2</sup> who recounts how his uncle, the Viscount Medardo of Terralba, was riding across the plague-ravaged plain of Bohemia en route to join the Christian army (3) in a war between Austria and Turkey. On the first day of fighting, the Viscount was cloven from pate to crotch by a cannonball (9-10). Saved by doctors on the battlefield, the right half of the Viscount was sent home with one leg, one arm, one eye, half a nose and half a mouth. 'The fact is that the next day my uncle opened his only eye, his half mouth, dilated his single nostril and breathed. The strong Terralba constitution had pulled him through. Now he was alive and cloven' (10).

When the half Viscount returns to his castle, he is leaning on a crutch and covered from head to foot with a black cloak and hood (12). He is the personification of evil and takes pleasure in murder, fire and torture. Animals react with apprehension and terror at this apparition (12). Medardo's father, old Viscount Aiolfo, permanently shuts himself into an aviary (11). When the evil Viscount kills his shrike, he dies from grief (14). The evil Viscount roams the countryside, destroying things by halves wherever he goes: pears are lopped in two as they hang on the trees (14); frogs are slashed in half (15), as are melons and mushrooms (15) and octopuses (34). Moreover, he tries to poison his nephew with mushrooms (15-16), so that his old nurse Sebastiana says: 'The bad half of Medardo has returned' (16).

When the narrator accompanies Dr Trelawney, a shipwrecked English doctor, on his 'scientific researches' (18), they escape death when peasants preceding them fall to their death crossing a small bridge of tree trunks straddling a deep abyss (19). The trunks have been sawn in half by the evil Viscount (20). The sabotage, of course, has been aimed at *them*. At this stage the Viscount is accustomed to going round on horseback, using a special saddle with one stirrup; wherever the sound of his horse's hooves are heard, everyone tries to run away (20). Next, he turns to arson (24): he burns down part of his own castle, hoping to incinerate his old nurse Sebastiana; finally, he packs her off to a leper colony (26).

Encountering his uncle with a catch of half octopuses, the narrator gets the following moralising lecture: 'If only I could halve every whole thing like this [...], so that everyone could escape from their obtuse and ignorant wholeness. [...] If you ever become a half of yourself [...], my boy, you'll understand things beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> Page references are based on the 1992 Mandarin / Minerva translation by Colquhoun.

common intelligence of brains that are whole. [...] And you also would find yourself wanting everything to be halved like you [...]’ (34).

When the evil Viscount decides to fall in love with the rustic girl Pamela (35), she is reticent to go to his castle (38). Since he keeps on harassing her, she goes to live in a cave where the narrator brings her food (40).

When his uncle’s conduct unexpectedly changes to being noble, the narrator deduces that the Viscount is now half good, half bad (44-48). Henceforth, the people quickly have to distinguish between the two halves of the Viscount so as to anticipate the kind of conduct they should expect. After an act of kindness to Pamela, the good Viscount explains that his half-body remained buried under a pyramid of Christian and Turkish corpses, but was tended and saved by two hermits. After travelling for years throughout all the nations of Christendom, he has now returned to his castle (50). The good Viscount also declares his love for Pamela, but she finds him ‘a bit too soft’ and ‘too daft’ (51). Despite an attempt on his life by the evil Viscount (55), the good Viscount continues doing acts of kindness. He spends much of the time correcting the evil deeds of his worse half. His saintly conduct, however, is frequently perceived as unbearably good to the point of being too pushy and interfering: ‘With this thin figure on his one leg, black-dressed, ceremonious and sententious, no one could have any fun without arousing public recriminations, malice and back-biting’ (63). When the two halves are finally united after a duel (70), the resulting whole Viscount is the usual average human mixture. Now he is able to marry Pamela (70).

The Viscount is not only cloven physically, but also psychologically. Through the Viscount’s opposite halves, Calvino illustrates the necessity of a person having two opposite sides in order for him to be complete. By this criterion, a person who is completely good and pious, or is completely evil, is unbalanced; an excess of piety is just as detrimental as an excess of cruelty. *The cloven Viscount* could therefore be read as an allegory, as a warning against extremism of any kind.

### 3.2 *The cloven Viscount* and magic realism

How does *The cloven Viscount* adhere to the criteria of magic realism? We have seen that works of magic realism must contain elements that are not commensurate with commonsense experience but are nevertheless rooted in a recognizable reality by being anchored by a social, historical and political background. Moreover, the fantastic elements have to be experienced by the characters and the readers as normal. In this case, then, the reader has to accept that an event which is experienced as absurd, or surrealist, or bizarre, and in fact impossible, has occurred: the ‘magical’ element, which consists of two halves of a person continuing to live as independent persons, and is now to be acknowledged as

forming part of the 'realistic' frame of the story. To reinforce such realism, Calvino makes use of a very realistic, prosaic mode of narration to convey far-fetched events. His style is unvarnished and matter-of-fact: 'The Viscount's body [...] not only lacked an arm and a leg, but the whole thorax and abdomen between that arm and leg had been swept away by the direct hit. All that remained of the head was one eye, one ear, one cheek, half a nose, half a mouth, half a chin and half a forehead; the other half of the head was just not there. The long and the short of it was that exactly half of him had been saved, the right part, perfectly preserved, without a scratch on it [...]' (p.10).

In *The cloven Viscount*, the fantasy element sets in very soon after the beginning and continues for the duration of the story. In this, the novella is exceptional, for normally incidents of magic realism make out but a small percentage of magic realist novels (Grobler 1993:93). Once the fantasy element has appeared, numerous allusions to real life continue to be made. A comparison with perhaps the best known example of magic realist fiction, Gabriel García Márquez's *One hundred years of solitude*, will illustrate the exceptional nature of *The cloven Viscount*, for numerous examples of magical elements occur scattered in the course of García Márquez's novel: the Spanish galleon found in the woods far distant from any navigable water (García Márquez 1970:12-13); mats that fly (García Márquez 1970:31); the priest who starts floating in the air after he has drunk hot chocolate (García Márquez 1970:85); José Arcadio Buendía's blood that with his death flows through the town exactly to his parents' house (García Márquez 1970:135); the ascension of Remedios The Beauty together with flapping sheets (García Márquez 1970:242-3); the occasion when it does not stop raining for 'four years, eleven months, and two days' (García Márquez 1970:320). The same pattern holds true for the magic realist novels of Isabel Allende. In *The house of the spirits*, for instance, magical elements are restricted to a limited number of occasions where Clara experiences clairvoyance and telekinesis. A spot check on the magic realist novels of Günter Grass, Louis de Bernières and Salman Rushdie will confirm that a limited number of magical incidents is the rule and that *The cloven Viscount* is exceptional in spreading a magical event throughout the narrative.

The 'reality' element of magic realist fiction is frequently based on actual political events that can be situated in space and time. Thus, in alluding to a military coup and torture, Isabel Allende's *The house of the spirits* recalls Gen. Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile and the reign of terror that followed it; Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's children* is based on the independence of India in 1947. In *The cloven Viscount*, the reader is soon informed that the historical backdrop is a war between Austria and Turkey (3), but no date is provided. Gore

Vidal<sup>3</sup> pinpoints the presumed date as 1716, which must refer to the Third Turkish War of 1716-18 (Kinder & Hilgemann 1978:265). Another historical allusion is to Captain Cook's sailing for Australia at the end (71), which can, however, only be dated to 1768-71 (Isaacs 1986:311). In view of the unaccounted time lapse, it would appear as if Calvino's historical reality has been infused with chronological magic. Of course, the 'reality' element of *The cloven Viscount* is also bolstered by details of everyday life: Pietrochiodo working in his carpentry workshop (21-22), daisies, dandelions and butterflies growing in the fields (35-36), Pamela making swings in the woods (54).

#### 4. *The dual nature of Aristophanic comedy: political realism and comic fantasy*

In Aristophanes' world, the pole of 'realism' is represented by the depiction (usually with comic exaggeration) of the socio-political realities of the Athens of his time. Thus, the theme of peace, as dramatised (advocated?) with varying degrees of urgency in his three 'peace plays' (*Acharnians*, *Peace* and *Lysistrata*), is very solidly anchored in the realities of an Attica which is ravaged by the Peloponnesian War while its citizens are spurred on to a continuation of the war by the demagoguery of war-mongering politicians such as Kleon. The shortcomings of the Athenian jury system, as satirised in *Wasps*, is firmly rooted in the historical reality of Athenian egalitarian jurisprudence. The potentially harmful effects of sophism on the Athenian education system, though unjustly ascribed to the fictional Socrates in *Clouds*, are based on a very real contemporary debate about moral theory and pedagogical practice. Indeed, such is the degree to which Old Comedy reflects socio-political realities that the *ekklesia* scene in *Acharnians*, as well as the depiction of the jury system in *Wasps*, for instance, can be used (though not without reservations) as a semi-historiographical document. As we shall see,<sup>4</sup> even *Birds*, in many ways Aristophanes' most escapist comedy, has been taken to reflect, in remarkably detailed fashion, the realities of Athenian imperialism in 414 BC.

So much for 'realism'. The obverse, however, is that every extant Aristophanic comedy contains an indispensable element of fantasy, called 'freedom from everyday logic' by Anderson (1978:24). In spite of the realistic geo-political allusions to war-time Attica, the plots invariably involve phantasmagoria similar to those More would create in his *Utopia* or Hope in *Ruritania*.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://des.emory.edu/mfp/calvino/novels.html> (accessed 2012/03/12).

<sup>4</sup> See Section 5.2.2.



Aristophanes' fancy takes him in apparently fortuitous directions, yet critics have detected a common pattern applicable to all his extant comedies, according to which the vicissitudes of the comic hero(ine) can be systematised. Dobrov (1988:16) regards Old Comedy plays as 'bipartite', the first 'movement' consisting of an *agon*, the second being a sort of revue play. The plays commence, as McLeish (1980:64) notes, with the hero in dismay, alienated from the normal world. Accordingly he / she devises a fantastic scheme by which natural laws are inverted and normality restored. Thus, in *Acharnians*, the war-weary Dikaionpolis sends the semi-divine Amphytheos on a humanly impossible embassy to conclude a peace treaty with Sparta. In *Peace*, Trygaios is whisked away to the palace of the gods on the back of a recalcitrant dung-beetle. In *Birds*, Peisetairos orchestrates the building of a Cloud City for birds and dissatisfied Athenians, ultimately even usurping the sovereignty of Zeus.

That such ventures frequently involve the transgression of norms, is forcefully argued by Halliwell (1997:xxvi): 'Most Aristophanic protagonists display a vitality that leads to the breaching of boundaries and the transgression of norms, whether those of class (e.g. with the peasant-farmers of *Acharnians* and *Peace*, or the Sausage-Seller in *Knights*, all of whom discover an improbable political prowess), of age (as with the elderly males of *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, and *Birds*, who experience a rejuvenation in their vigour, sexuality, capacities of persuasion, and so on), of gender (as with the active heroines of *Lysistrata* and *Assembly-Women*), or even of 'biology' (as with the god-defying Trygaios in *Peace* or the semi-metamorphosed Peisetairos in *Birds*)'.

After the fantastic mission of the hero figure has been accomplished, nothing much happens further in the play to change his fortunes. The second part of most extant Aristophanic comedies thus has an 'episodic' nature,<sup>5</sup> with very little in the way of suspense. Various figures from the 'real' world visit the hero so as to share materially in his success; they are almost without exception driven away, providing for much slapstick humour. Ultimately, with 'the restoration of true cosmic order' (McLeish 1980:64), the play ends on a happy note,<sup>6</sup> in keeping with generic convention.<sup>7</sup> In the concluding celebration scene (a legacy of the probable origin of comedy from the *komos* or 'procession of revellers'), the comic hero is rewarded with pleasures of a sexual and / or gastronomic nature.

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<sup>5</sup> *Frogs* represents the most noteworthy exception in that the second part contains the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides. It would, presumably, have stretched even Aristophanes' imagination to let a queue of living Athenian mortals visit Hades as hangers-on begging for scraps.

<sup>6</sup> The extant copy of *Clouds* is exceptional in that the ending is, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, reminiscent of tragedy.

<sup>7</sup> Arist. *Poet.* 1453a30-39.

Sifakis (1992:140-142) has devised an even more elaborate scheme, based on a simplified version of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp's structural analysis of the thirty-one possible 'functions' of folk tales, to systematise the 'narrative structures' of Old Comedy. The point of departure of Propp (1984:70) is that 'all wondertale plots consisted of identical functions and had identical structure'. Sifakis' scheme contains the following sequence of 'functions': (1) Villainy, lack or misfortune; (2) Decision and plan to counteract misfortune; (3) Service or help of a supernatural or quasi-magical agent or helper obtained; (4) Transference; (5) Opposition or obstacles to be overcome; (6) Persuasion exercised in debate; (7) Liquidation of villainy or misfortune; (8) Triumph of hero. Clearly, 'fantasy' will come into play especially in functions (2), (3) and (4) (Dikaiopolis' instant peace in *Acharnians*, Trygaios' beetle-flight in *Peace*, Dionysos' *katabasis* in *Frogs*). Sifakis (1992:129) provides the following perspective on function (2): '[I]n deciding to do something about the difficult or unfortunate situation in which they are, the bearers of this function know no limit of imagination, and usually embark on a wondrous course of action. Scholars often speak of brilliant, revolutionary, or grandiose, ideas or ambitions of the comic heroes, but such descriptions are hardly applicable once it is granted that the characters of the comic tales do not have to obey the laws of time, space, and causation, of ordinary, everyday, life'. The following could serve as examples of function (3): In *Acharnians*, Amphiheos serves as semi-divine helper to effect the peace with Sparta within 45 lines, whereas animal helpers include the giant beetle that carries Trygaios to heaven in *Peace*, and the jackdaw and the crow accompanying Peisetairos and Euelpides in the prologue of *Birds*. Herakles gives information about the route to Hades to Dionysos in the prologue of *Frogs*. Sifakis (1992:130) provides the following perspective on function (4): 'In seeking to rectify their misfortune [...], several persons in the comic stories have to move from one place to another, cover long distances, or even be transferred to a different world, in order to reach the place where the object they desire to obtain is situated, or where they have to fight for their objective. The helpers point the way [...], act as guides or transferers [...], or even go by themselves on behalf of someone else who has secured their services [...]'. An example of transference is when Trygaios is transported to 'heaven' in *Peace*. This category is not applicable to *Knights*, *Clouds* or *Wasps*.

Such, then, is the typical 'narrative structure' of Old Comedy. As substantiated by the above examples, it contributed to the make-believe of a never-never-land, the depiction of the realities of late fifth-century Athens providing the opposite pole, that of realism.

## 5. *Aristophanes: Birds*

In this section, the theoretical duality introduced in Section 4 will be applied to *Birds*. But first, a plot summary will be provided.

### 5.1 *Birds*: a plot summary

The prologue of *Birds* commences with two men, whose names will only be given in 644-5 as Euelpides and Peisetairos, wandering to and fro in a remote spot (1-4).<sup>8</sup> They want to escape to a carefree place — what Slater (2002:135) calls ‘an anticity’ — away from Athens’ obsession with lawsuits (33-45).

Euelpides and Peisetairos have birds (a jackdaw and a crow) bought from a named Athenian market-trader chained to their wrists, yet purchased with a view to finding, and getting advice from, the mythical character Tereus (13-15). From the outset the plot is thus grounded in both the real and the fantastic, in what Halliwell (1997:xxiii) calls ‘a binary frame of reference that is quintessentially Aristophanic’. Since King Tereus of Thrace was changed into a hoopoe, Tereus combines human and avian features; he thus is a bridge between the world of humans and that of birds (Mahoney 2007:272). When Tereus’ suggestions about where they might live do not appeal to the two Athenians (143-154), Peisetairos proposes that the birds should found a city in the sky and build a wall around it (175-184), so that the birds, as intermediaries, could have power over both humans and gods (185-193). The plan, of course, is fantastic and impossible, as befits an Aristophanic plot. Moreover, if a magic realist paradigm is applied to Aristophanes, it represents the ‘magical’ pole.

But first the birds have to be persuaded to adopt the plan. In the *parodos*, the twenty-four choristers are identified as twenty-four species of birds (267-304). According to Slater (2002:137), ‘[t]he visual result, once the bird chorus fills the orchestra below the level on which the actors are situated, is that the stage and the city it represents are now airborne’.

Despite initial hostility the birds are won over by Peisetairos in two *agon*-like manifesto speeches. In the first (479-538), he argues that the birds, being older than gods, once reigned over gods. In the second (550-626), he proposes that they fortify their territory (the air) and demand the restoration of the kingship to them by Zeus; moreover, humans should sacrifice to birds instead of to gods.

Normally, the *parabasis* is a digression from the main action of the play, in which the Chorus functions as mouthpiece of the poet on topical issues. In *Birds*, however, the first *parabasis* (676-800) is delivered in the character of the Chorus

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<sup>8</sup> Line references are based on Dunbar’s 1995 edition.

rather than that of the poet, and devoted to avian rather than to literary or political issues. Thus, dramatic illusion is not breached. First, Hesiod's *Theogony* is satirised by the insertion of birds in the divine lineage and the provision of wings to some divinities. Next, the Chorus mentions various ways in which the birds assist men. If men then honour the birds as gods, the birds will bring them wealth and happiness.

When Peisetairos and Euelpides reappear after the *parabasis*, they are equipped with wings (804-5). Peisetairos suggests the name *Nephelokokkygia* ('Cloudkuckooland') for their new city (819), and when Euelpides is sent off to dispatch heralds to the gods and the humans (843-5), Peisetairos remains as sole organiser. Euelpides does not reappear, and the actor who was playing his role now becomes free to play various other roles. As is customary in Aristophanic comedy, the second part of the play is taken up by a sequence of individuals who visit the protagonist to share in his fortune. They consist, consecutively, of a Priest (862-894), a Poet (904-953), an Oracle-monger (959-991), Meton the mathematician (992-1020), an Inspector (1021-1034) and a Decree-seller (1035-1057). After their cameo roles, most of these characters are chased away in slapstick scenes. Now follows the second *parabasis* (1058-1117), in which the Bird Chorus proclaims that in future men shall sacrifice to them. Meanwhile two Messengers have arrived: the first, to report that the building of the wall has been completed by the collective effort of different species of birds (1122-1163); the second, to report that a god has invaded their airspace (1170-1184). It turns out to be Iris the rainbow (1199-1261), followed by the Third Messenger, who brings Peisetairos a golden crown and, in linking contemporary Athenians with bird species, names prominent individuals in a manner reminiscent of parabatic passages (1271-1307). In a continuation of the visiting scenes of 862-1057, a Rebellious Son (1337-1371), the dithyrambic poet Kinesias (1372-1409), and a Sycophant (1410-1469) arrive to ask for wings. Next to turn up is Prometheus, who explains that the gods are getting hungry for lack of sacrifices, and that a treaty will be made once Zeus has given Peisetairos *Basileia* ('Princess') as wife (1494-1552). Prometheus having departed, Poseidon, Herakles and a Triballian god arrive as official envoys from the gods. They hand over the sceptre of sovereignty to Peisetairos, and agree that *Basileia* shall be given in marriage to him (1565-1693). In the *exodos*, the play concludes with the expected wedding scene (1720-1765).

This represents the triumph of Peisetairos. At the start Peisetairos and Euelpides are seeking a carefree place with no lawcourts. When the Hoopoe asks them what they want to do there, they mention a wedding-feast and sex (128-142). This has now been attained. Despite the would-be elevated status of birds, the play ends with humans as victors and beneficiaries. Discussing Aristophanic plays in general, Halliwell (1997:xxvii) comes to a similar conclusion: 'Although egotism

*qua* bold self-assertion is a recurrent characteristic, Aristophanic protagonists are certainly not uniform manifestations of a Freudian id or of purely selfish instincts. Peisetairos in *Birds* comes closest to this status: his original desire, shared with Euelpides, for a decadently sybaritic life (128-142) is eventually fulfilled in a blaze of cosmic glory in which [...] power and sexuality coalesce’.

Against this background, *Birds* can be reduced to two themes:

- (i) The rebellion of birds against human domination, and the need of the birds to be worshipped (479-626). For a while the birds and humans are allies (in fact, Peisetairos and Euelpides need wings to function: 804-5), but ultimately Peisetairos is victorious as autocrat who even sacrifices birds (1688-9), contrary to his condemnation of bird sacrifices in 524-538.
- (ii) The rebellion of humans against divine domination, as is embodied in the fact that Peisetairos marries *Basileia* in the *exodos*, and carries Zeus’ lightning shaft; and also in the fact that Olympian gods (e.g. Poseidon) and demigods (e.g. Herakles and Prometheus) are depicted as gullible idiots (1494-1693).

Ultimately, then, it is not the birds who are worshipped, but effectively Peisetairos, who acts as Zeus’ successor.

## 5.2 Political reality vs. comic fantasy in *Birds*

In seeking to identify passages pertaining to ‘political reality’ in *Birds*, one should be especially on the look-out for the *parabasis* and comparable passages, as well as for the ‘revue’ scenes where visitors from the ‘real world’ turn up. For ‘comic fantasy’, one need look no further than the hero’s fantastic plan.

### 5.2.1 Fantasy

All eleven extant Aristophanic comedies have utopian elements. They have to be read within the comic convention of far-fetched, fantasy-driven plots. Even so, a notable difference in tone and theme between *Birds* and its predecessors is discernible: it is the first Aristophanic comedy which is automatically placed in the category of ‘utopian’ literature, and some critics regard it as an escapist play without obvious points of contact with the political realities of Athens in 414 BC. From this perspective, the emphasis is more on the magical than the realistic aspect of Aristophanes’ brand of ‘magic realism’.

Such an interpretation is supported by the following considerations:

- (i) The theme and plot are fantastic: the founding of a fortified avian city 'in the clouds', and a rebellion against Zeus. Peisetairos' ideal could only have been realized on the *skene* and the *orchestra* of the Dionysos theatre, and not on the Athenian *agora* or the *Pnyx*. Aristophanes' 'Cloudcuckooland' is indeed what the English language has since made of it: a pie in the sky, unattainable, a Land of Cockaigne that can only exist as fiction, as wishful thinking. On the wings of Aristophanes' imagination, humans and gods acquire wings, birds speak like humans, and hybrid beings like Tereus and Prokne, already magically transformed from people to birds by mythology, confirm that the boundaries of reality have been blurred. *Birds* is therefore Aristophanes' most fantastic extant comedy.
- (ii) This consideration is, of course, reinforced by the convention of dramatic illusion. In a non-mimetic genre, the visual and auditory impact mediated by a production would have been absent. As Aristotelian ὄψις ('display'), *Birds* is thus in the sphere of fantasy, as is confirmed by masks, costumes and the *deus ex machina* (used for Iris' entrance in 1199). The politicised spectator is not confronted with topical figures such as Lamachos (in *Acharnians*) or Sokrates (in *Clouds*), but by the spectacular masks of thirty (Barrett & Sommerstein 1978:149) species of birds. However much justice they might do to ornithological reality, they reflect the fantasy of never-never land. In the real world, birds do not speak; humans do not sprout wings.
- (iii) Importantly, there are no characters who are fictionalised representations of contemporary politicians (such as a barely disguised Kleon in *Knights*), philosophers (Sokrates in *Clouds*), or poets (Euripides and Aischylos in *Frogs*). Thus, it is made clear that *Birds* does not have an axe to grind with any one public figure.
- (iv) In view of the *didaskalos* function of the comic poet, convention demands political pronouncements in the *parabasis* of an Aristophanic comedy. But in both *parabaseis* of *Birds* (676-800, 1058-1117) *explicit* political allusions are notably absent. In fact, if one were to judge merely by *parabasis* convention, it can be argued that of all Aristophanes' fifth-century comedies, *Birds* alludes least to topical issues. The first *parabasis* is devoted predominantly to a demythologising of Hesiod's *Theogony* by describing the vaunted

seniority of birds to gods; the second contains propaganda for the protection of birds, and even the conventional plea to bribe the jury at the end (1102-1117) is clothed in an ornithological metaphor ('owls from Laurion'). Moreover, the birds remain birds; the dramatic illusion is not temporarily breached by them 'becoming' men.

- (v) In the rest of the comedy, there are also notably few references by name to politicians of whom we know from Thukydides or Plutarch that they were prominent in 414 BC. That Kleon (who was killed in 422) or Hyperbolos (who was ostracised in 417/6) would not be the target of invective in 414, is in keeping with comic convention (i.e. respecting the dead or banned). But what, then, of Demosthenes and Lamachos, *stratēgoi* in Sicily? Do they really deserve no mention? Aristophanes *does* deign to refer *implicitly* to their colleagues Nikias (363, 639) and Alkibiades (145-7), but without the venom that characterised his tirade against Kleon in the previous decade. When the poet coins the infinitive μελλονικιῶν (639), for instance, there is no malice in it, because Nikias' excessive caution was common knowledge — and probably accepted as an occupational hazard — ever since the debate on the eve of the Sicilian expedition. MacDowell (1995:223) argues that 'all three jokes [about Nikias and Alkibiades] are quite incidental and might not bring Sicily to the audience's mind at all'.
- (vi) It could be argued, on extra-dramatic considerations, that the year 414 provided less material for critical political pronouncements than the historically oriented reader would suspect. The controversial expedition to Sicily, which would in retrospect take up such a prominent place in the course of the Peloponnesian War, did indeed depart from the Peiraieus in 415, but up to the production of *Birds* it had not experienced any noteworthy successes or failures. Moreover, Sicily was geographically distant; in the absence of modern media, it would not have been a daily reality for the Athenian spectator. In addition, no large-scale resumption of the Peloponnesian War had taken place after the Peace of Nikias in 421. Sommerstein (1987:5) links the atmosphere of unrealistic optimism which permeates the play to this background: '[E]very time an allusion is made in the play to current, recent or projected military operations, the tone adopted is one of almost cheerful bellicosity'.

### 5.2.2 Political allusions

Despite the above emphasis on fantasy in *Birds*, it is not merely a timeless flight of fancy which could just as well have been produced a decade earlier or later. It has also been interpreted as a play which reflects contemporary politics. The original ‘allegorical’ interpretation of possible political allusions in *Birds* dates back to the German critic J W Süvern in 1826. In recent years, however, the thesis has been forcefully restated, refined and supplemented by Arrowsmith 1973, Katz 1976, and Vickers 1995, the latter taking Pierre Brumoy’s 1730 work as point of departure. These critics read *Birds* as a subtle political allegory of the arrogance and lack of realism underlying the Sicilian Expedition. According to some of these interpretations, *Birds* is a ‘camouflaged parody’ (Solomos 1974:178) of Alkibiades’ Sicilian venture, with the following parallels: Peisetairos represents Alkibiades, Euelpides Nikias, Cloudcuckooland Sicily, the birds the Athenians and the gods the Spartans.<sup>9</sup> Such an interpretation is highly speculative. Nevertheless, it reminds the reader to be always alert to possible political allusions in Aristophanes. Although *Birds* clearly lacks the explicit political message of *Acharnians*, *Knights* or *Peace*, it is not devoid of political undertones.

Let me cite the following arguments in support of a politicised *Birds*:

- (i) The motive for the building of the city in the clouds initially appears to be theological, but eventually it transpires that it was political: it is built with a view to political power and independence, as is confirmed by Peisetairos’ status in the *exodos*.
- (ii) Even if *Birds* is mere fantasy, the theme of escapism brings out the political reality of Athens in 414 in contrasting relief. From what did Peisetairos and Euelpides want to escape? From the stark reality of Athens and its love of litigation (33-45, 109-110). Where did they *not* want to escape to (143-154)? To places along the coast (for there the *Salaminia* would be able to pick them up like Alkibiades);<sup>10</sup> to Lepreon in Elis (where the Spartans had just settled a colony of Helots fighting under Brasidas) (Dunbar 1995:182); to Opous in Lokris (for the population there was so anti-Athenian that a military garrison had to be stationed there).

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<sup>9</sup> For other politicised interpretations of *Birds*, see MacDowell 1995:222-5.

<sup>10</sup> Dunbar 1995:180 reminds us that the Athenian official galley *Salaminia* was sent some nine months before to Sicily to recall Alkibiades and others to face trial on charges of mutilating the *Hermes* or sacrilegiously parodying the Mysteries.



However, their ‘escape’ was not quite successful, for in the *alazon* scenes in the second half of *Birds* an unceasing stream of layabouts, greedy parasites and bureaucrats — who represent just that from which Peisetairos and Euelpides wanted to get away — turn up to bother them and, for the most part, to be pummelled and sent away. It is in part on account of the large number of visitors (thirteen) in the second part of the comedy that with 1765 lines, *Birds* is the longest extant Aristophanic comedy.

These visits are, in part, comic convention, but they are also commensurate with the theme of the comedy, for it is, after all, a *polis* which is to be founded, and the advice of land surveyors, priests, and oracles *does* therefore prove to be functional. Sommerstein (1987:1) justifies the reality base of the avian city as follows: ‘[...] the city of Cloudcuckooville [...] proves in many ways to be a replica of Athens. [...] For example, its founders expect it to have a rocky Acropolis (836) and a festival closely resembling the Panathenaea (827); it has Chios as an ally (879); its laws are inscribed on *kurbeis* (1354); and it holds tribal competitions for dithyrambic choruses (1405-7)’. Mahoney (2007:271) comes to a similar conclusion: ‘Most readers conclude that *Birds* is about Athens. Cloud-cuckoo-land is Athens with feathers, and Peisetairus re-creates the hustle and bustle he claimed he was trying to escape’.

- (iii) Allusions to contemporary events and public figures *do* occur, even if no significant figure is singled out for frequent or vitriolic lambasting. Let us have a look at the treatment of figures such as Kleonymos, Diëtrephe, Diagoras, Peisandros and Syrakosios. They could provisionally be regarded as more important for political or religious reasons. By the same criterion figures such as Sokrates, Meton, Theogenes, Proxenides, Exekestides, Prodikos, Lysikrates, Kallias, Menippos, Kinesias, Lampon and Chairephon could be omitted in terms of the political limelight they were exposed to in 414. In each instance the challenge will be, as is customary in Aristophanic criticism, to decide whether Aristophanes is merely being playfully satirical or has a serious political axe to grind.

That Kleonymos is ridiculed as a glutton and a coward (289, 1473-1481) should come as no surprise, for this has been the case in each extant play before *Birds*, with particular reference to an occasion on which he is alleged to have flung away his shield on the battlefield.

However, according to Dunbar (1995:238) Kleonymos appears, from proposals he carried regulating the collection of Athenian tribute in 426 BC, 'to have been an active pro-Kleon democrat who deserves more serious consideration than Aristophanes' gibes suggest', and this puts him in another category than an *alazon*. That Kleonymos proposed a reward of one thousand drachmas for information about the desecration of the Hermai and the profanation of the Mysteries (Katz 1976:375), is neither mentioned nor implied in *Birds*, but is information derived from Andokides, *On the mysteries* 27.

According to Dunbar (1995:485), Diëtrephe was put in charge of the Thracian mercenaries who committed an appalling massacre at Mykalessos in 413; in 412/11, as a supporter of the oligarchs, he overthrew the democracy on Thasos. These events, however, postdate *Birds*. So in *Birds* 798, Diëtrephe is not taken to task for his political activities, but ridiculed on account of his wicker flask factory, when the Chorus Leader says: 'Look at Diëtrephe: what a meteoric career, and his wings are only made of wicker'. This is reminiscent of similar gibes at Kleon for his tannery and Kleophon for his lyre-factory.

In *Birds* 1073, the Chorus Leader announces: 'To him that kills Diagoras the Melian, a reward of one talent'. According to Dunbar (1995:581), the decree outlawing Diagoras for impiety (ἀσέβεια) is dated to 415/14. Diagoras' impiety was 'ridicule of the Mysteries and discouraging many from initiation'. Dunbar (1995:583) argues that 'his offense, if in writing, is said (*Suda*) to have been committed in a (prose) work mysteriously entitled Ἀποπυργίζοντες Λόγοι, "involving his retreat and abandonment of belief about the divine"'. Katz (1976:372), following Jacoby, translates Diagoras' title as 'Fortifying Arguments', i.e. arguments which either defend mankind by a towered wall or blockade the gods with one. Katz (1976:373) proposes that Aristophanes uses the implications of Diagoras' title for Peisetairos' plan to fortify *Nephelokkygia*.

Dunbar (1995:712) identifies Peisandros, to whom fairly innocuous reference is made in 1556-8, as being prominent as one of the inquiry commissioners appointed in 415 to bring to justice those responsible for mutilating the Herms and parodying the Mysteries. Katz (1976:373-4) emphasises the prominence of Peisandros as a radical democrat: '[I]n the context of spring, 414, ridicule of Peisander was politically significant, for, as Andocides, *On the Mysteries* 27 and 36

informs us, Peisander acted as a ζητητής and increased the rewards for information concerning profanation of the Mysteries [as an oligarchical plot]. In other words, Aristophanes, *Birds* 1556 ff., attacked a leading radical democrat and instigator of the contemporary religious and political furor'. I think the passage in question is too playful to be construed as an 'attack'.

When the Third Messenger names public figures after birds, the politician Syrakosios is called a Popinjay (1297). Dunbar (1995:643) explains that he probably owed the nickname to his raucous oratorical style. Syrakosios is, however, more important for the decree named after him, which will be discussed below.

So it transpires that a handful of relatively prominent public figures get their share of comic abuse in *Birds*. In spite of the above examples, however, the tone and atmosphere of *Birds* is not determined to the same extent as earlier comedies by explicit political allusions. In view of the fact that it was Aristophanes' first extant comedy since 421, it is indeed strange that themes such as the Melian massacre, the mutilation of the *Hermai*, the Sicilian expedition or Alkibiades' treason was not used more explicitly as comic material in a genre like Old Comedy.

Cartledge (1990:61) offers the following explanation: '[T]here were especially compelling reasons for an Athenian comedian to write an escapist drama in 415/4, following the passions and emotions stirred by the twin religious scandals of herm-desecration and profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries. [...] [T]his was no time for confronting democratic politics, religion or imperialism broadside on in a comedy'. The simplest explanation for Aristophanes' inhibition — and Cartledge fails to mention this — is probably that he felt intimidated by Syrakosios' libel decree of 415/14, according to which comic poets were forbidden 'to mention somebody by name in a comedy' (μὴ κομωδεῖσθαι ὀνομασί τινα: *scholion Birds* 1297), and that he therefore limited personal allusions and stripped them of any venom. It is worth mentioning, however, that *The Revellers*, in which reference was made to the mutilation of the *Hermai*, earned Ameipsias (= Phrynichos?) a first prize in 414. Merry (1961:4) interprets this as proof that the Decree of Syrakosios did not agree with public taste, and adds that Syrakosios was openly criticised by Phrynichos in his *Hermit*, which received the third prize at the *Dionysia* of 414. Halliwell (1991:59-63) argues that the decree of Syrakosios was

restricted to a specific ban on naming those convicted of impiety over the Herms and Mystery scandals of 415. Dunbar (1995:239), however, regards the decree as a Hellenistic fiction. At any rate, a decree limiting comic licence is not in itself improbable, for such a decree was passed in 440/39 and remained in force until 437/6 (Katz 1976:366).

## 6. Comparison

A comparison between magic realism in *The cloven Viscount*, and fantasy and realism in *Birds*, gives rise to the following results:

### 6.1 Differences

It comes as no surprise that there are significant generic differences between Old Comedy, with its many idiosyncrasies, and both the twentieth-century novel (the customary medium for magic realism) and the novella. Had magic-realist novelists imitated Aristophanic comedy on a formal level, they would have had to introduce genre-specific elements such as the chorus, the *agon* and the *parabasis*, which would have been non-functional in a novel. Moreover, Greek comedies were by convention written in verse, whereas Calvino makes use of prose, as is customary in magic realism. Of course, *Birds* is primarily written to be enacted before an audience and thus also contains non-verbal codes, whereas *The cloven Viscount* is restricted to written format, but for the purpose of this comparison both works are treated merely as written texts.

The ideological function of the Athenian comic theatre was, inter alia, to provide the citizens with political advice. That accounts, in large part, for the numerous political allusions in Aristophanes. *Birds* contains more allusions to identifiable contemporary figures and events than *The cloven Viscount*, which, if it is read as an allegory, exudes an aura of timelessness. Most other examples of magic realism contain more recognizable and politically relevant contemporary allusions: the early works of Marquez and Allende, for instance, are more politically engaged than *The cloven Viscount*. The latter does, however, contain allusions to contemporary institutions, practices, values and socio-economic relations. On account of the numerous allusions to datable events and public figures in *Birds*, we would have been able to date its production to 414 BC even

without the *didaskaliai*, whereas the fictional date of *The cloven Viscount* remains somewhat vague.<sup>11</sup>

## 6.2 Similarities

Since drama lacks, in Aristotelian terms, a ‘narrative’ component,<sup>12</sup> it is different from epic in that it condenses information. In narratological terms, the novel could be regarded as an heir to epic, because it makes use of both direct speech and third-person narration. An Aristophanic comedy, which dispenses with third-person narration and is restricted to direct speech, is therefore shorter than a novel. This is reinforced by dramatic economy. In *Acharnians*, for instance, Amphiheos only needs 45 lines to get to Sparta and back so as to secure Dikaio polis his private peace. But since *The cloven Viscount* is a novella of 69 pages rather than a novel, the two works compared happen to be of approximately equal length, which facilitates a comparison.

Both genres betray a striking duality: on the one hand, the fictionalised narrative is rooted in a real and realistic world which reflects the socio-political reality of a certain identifiable era (respectively late fifth-century democratic Athens and early eighteenth-century feudal Bohemia); on the other hand, the action stems from fantasy, i.e. in real life it is not realizable to build a city in the clouds or that half a man can function as an independent person. Of importance is that the fantasy element in both works is accepted without surprise or comment as ‘normal’ by the participants. What Halliwell (1997:xxiii) says about the characters in *Birds*, could equally well be applied to *The cloven Viscount*: ‘They [are] generally displaying a capacity to tolerate incongruity in themselves as well as around them’.

In both works the fantasy element sets in very soon after the beginning and continues for the duration of the narrative. In this, *The cloven Viscount* is exceptional, for normally magic realism incidents make out but a small percentage of magic realist novels (Grobler 1993:93). Once the fantasy element has started, numerous allusions to real life continue to be made in both works.

In Section 2, it was mentioned that magic realist texts are frequently situated in ‘liminal space’, where transformation, metamorphosis and dissolution are common phenomena, and that the same could apply to Aristophanic texts. In *The cloven Viscount*, the liminal space is situated between the world of the whole Viscount and that of his cloven counterpart; the transformation consists of the cleaving of the Viscount and the consequent independent existence of his two

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<sup>11</sup> Gore Vidal, however, does date the war between Austria and Turkey to 1716 (see Section 3.2).

<sup>12</sup> Arist. *Poet.* 1448a20-23.

parts. In *Birds*, the liminal space is situated between the real world and *Nephelokokkygia*; the transformation consists of the founding of *Nephelokokkygia* and the consequent metamorphosis of men into birds.

## 7. Conclusion

My conclusion is perforce tentative, since this article is exploratory. More magic-realist novels and Aristophanic comedies will have to be examined to arrive at a more empirically grounded conclusion, as the works examined are too limited in number and perhaps not representative of their genres.

In comparative literature, research frequently makes use of intertext theory. It may appear not to be relevant to this article, for research on magic realism yields no evidence that the founders or exponents of this genre ever linked it to Aristophanes: Old Comedy provided no hypotext of which magic realism is a derivative hypertext. Nevertheless, some of the terminology of intertext theory may be useful for understanding the relationship between Aristophanes and magic realism. In his seminal work on the relationship between texts, Gérard Genette (1993:398-399) compares the process by which Text A is transformed into Text B to the creation of a *palimpsest*. A real-life *palimpsest* is the result of one or more texts written over the original on a vellum or papyrus manuscript. When applied to comparative literature, the metaphor of a *palimpsest* is used in similar fashion to describe the result of Text B being 'superscripted' or 'superimposed' on Text A. An obvious example of such a 'hypotext' cited by Genette (1993:5-6, 7-8) is the *Odyssey*, with Vergil's *Aeneid* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* as two of its many 'hypertexts'. As has been said earlier, Old Comedy provided no hypotext of which magic realism is a derivative hypertext. But even so, the metaphor of a palimpsest is useful for understanding the relationship between Aristophanes and magic realism, as long as the focus shifts from two texts being compared to two genres, and as long as there is no question of intentional adaptation. Then, reading a work of magic realism could evoke comparable scenes, characters or mechanisms from Aristophanes (or vice versa), and the reader would be enriched by the comparison. When, for instance, in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta takes on the personality of the archangel Gibreel, his winged state may remind one of the characters and setting of *Birds*. But Gibreel and Saladin Chamcha falling from the exploding aeroplane may also remind one of Trygaios' flight to Olympos on the back of a dung-beetle in *Peace* (or of Dionysos' *katabasis* in *Frogs*).

In intertext theory, the metaphor of a library has been used to express the relationship between texts (Van Boheemen 1981:123): 'een bibliotheek waarin alles wat ooit geschreven, ja zelfs gedacht is, is bewaard'. If it is generally true that

‘meaning’ can be ‘produced’ in *any* text by considering its Derridean ‘difference’ with another text (Van Boheemen 1981:126), then this should be all the more valid in texts in related genres such as magic realism and Aristophanic Old Comedy. One could imagine the world of literature as one vast library in which different texts from different genres and eras are in continuous dialogue with one another, a *sotto voce* buzz of literary exchange enriching the whole corpus of existing texts. This also has implications for the reader: ‘the whole body of literature is available, at least potentially, when a new literary artefact is being encoded by a writer or decoded by a reader’ (Ruthroff, quoted by Brink 1987:29).

Another possible explanation for the similarities between Aristophanes and magic realism is that the ‘magic’ and ‘realistic’ elements which appear in both genres represent a sediment of a Jungian collective unconscious that spans ages and genres. In 1936, Carl Jung (1959:43) postulated that ‘in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche [...], there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite forms to certain psychic contents’. Jung (1964:67) linked the collective unconscious to what Freud called ‘archaic remnants’ — mental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual’s own life and which seem to be aboriginal, innate, and inherited shapes of the human mind; he regarded the contents of the unconscious psyche as similar to Levy-Bruhl’s *représentations collectives* or mythological *motifs*, and Hubert and Mauss’ *categories of the imagination*. In deciding whether to treat Dumas’ *The Count of Monte-Christo* as serious literature, Umberto Eco (2003:53) touches on something similar: ‘The problem is that literary virtues cannot only be identified by lexical elegance or syntactical fluency. They also depend on narrative rhythm, on a narrative wisdom that allows a story to transmigrate from para-literature to literature and produce mythical figures and situations which survive in the collective imagination’.

It is possible that both Aristophanic fantasy and magic realism could represent ‘archetypes of the collective unconscious’ (Jung) or ‘mythical situations which survive in the collective imagination’ (Eco), and thus the temporal or generic gap between Aristophanes and magic realism is bridged, since such archetypes are universal. It can then explain why these components are also to be found in related subgenres such as science fiction or utopian literature over the ages.

However, the theoretical model that I prefer to account for the correspondences between Aristophanes and magic realism, can be found in the

distinction Aristotle<sup>13</sup> makes between 'poetry' and 'history': '[T]he historian narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur'. In simple terms, 'poetry' here means more or less 'fiction', and 'history' 'facts'. If this differentiation is applied to all literature, from the driest documentary novel or New Journalism to the most fantastic science fiction or lyric poetry, a continuum can be postulated on which a certain genre can hypothetically be classified on a grading scale as somewhere between factual and fictional: x% factual; 100-x% fictional. In terms of this interpretation of Aristotle's differentiation, all genres have both a fictional or fantasy component and a factual or realistic component, however small or large both may be. It appears as if these two components are more or less in balance both in Aristophanes and in magic realism (at least in *The cloven Viscount*), but within certain rules: the narrative is offered as factual, while the plot is fantastic; moreover, the fantastic is accepted as normal by those experiencing it.

I have offered four theoretical frameworks to account for the correspondences between Aristophanic fantasy and magic realism: the metaphor of a palimpsest, the metaphor of a library, the Jungian collective unconscious, and Aristotle's distinction between 'poetry' and 'history'. I hope that these exploratory musings may serve as stimulus for further research on this topic.

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